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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASMARA 000958

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/19/2017

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SUBJECT: BLUNT TALK WITH YEMANE GEBREAB ON TERRORISM

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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11. (C) Summary: The Ambassador and DCM met with Yemane Gebreab, chief political advisor to President Isaias, and delivered an unambiguous, tough message about the potential consequences of Eritrea supporting, or allowing its territory to be used to support, extremists with links to terrorism. Yemane said Eritrea wants to see a secular, unified Somalia, is against terrorism, has many common interests with the United States in counter-terrorism and other fields, and hopes to find ways to cooperate with the United States. He allowed that since August he has "never felt more pessimistic" about relations with the United States. He shared his assessment of dynamics in Somalia, Ethiopia, eastern Sudan, South Sudan, and Darfur. End Summary.

12. (C) Empty Building, Full Discussion

The ambassador and DCM called on Yemane Gebreab, political chief of the regime's mass organization, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), on December 19. The meeting was held in the deserted PFDJ headquarters in Asmara; Yemane had forgotten it was the Id al-Fitr national holiday but didn't want to break the appointment after it had been made. He met alone with the ambassador and DCM for over an hour. Yemane said he would be willing to discuss the full range of regional and bilateral issues, a departure from his recent hesitancy to discuss with the embassy anything unrelated to Sudan. He was thoughtful and relaxed throughout the conversation, and spoke English fluently.

13. (C) Straight Talk on Terrorism

Yemane started by noting that the United States and Eritrea shared many values and interests, adding that relations had been very good in the 1991-97 period and could be again. He said that "for some reason, the United States has chosen to see Eritrea as an enemy," commenting that he saw no justification for the hostility. The ambassador said anti-American Islamist radicals operating in Somalia and elsewhere constituted a direct threat to the United States and American interests in the region; reports by the United Nations Monitoring Group and others that Eritrea was

providing assistance to them were viewed with the utmost seriousness by U.S. officials. The United States was considering officially identifying Al-Shabaab as a Foreign Terrorist Organization; should the USG at some point determine that any country, including Eritrea, was providing assistance to Al-Shabaab, that country could find itself on the State Sponsors of Terrorism list. Such a designation would have substantial, long-term consequences for the designee. Yemane listened attentively and without interrupting.

14. (C) On Somalia

"Eritrea has no interest in supporting or promoting Islamic extremists in Somalia," Yemane declared. He said Eritrea had previously offered counter-terrorism help to the United States on Somalia, but that the current U.S. approach to Somalia is "counter-productive" to the objectives of America's Global War on Terror. He said Eritrea has long and intimate links with Somalia and wants to see the emergence of a secular, united, and peaceful Somalia. Given the "current political geography," it was likely that the eventual Somali government would be somewhat Islamic in character, although "Al-Shabaab is not the future of Somalia." He averred that the CIC members in Asmara were moderating their positions.

15. (C) On Ethiopia

The ambassador tried to get Yemane to talk specifics on the border issue, particularly to press on GSE views on the Pasco initiative and the status of the Temporary Security Zone. Yemane didn't bite, saying only that "for Eritrea it's not a

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border dispute, it's a matter of national survival." He said, with a trace of a smile, "my personal preference is for Ethiopia to keep many troops in Somalia for as long as possible," but said more seriously that a lasting solution to Somalia would be good not only for Somalia, but for Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the United States as well. He said there is no reason that Eritrea couldn't have normal relations with Ethiopia and for the United States to be friends with both Ethiopia and Eritrea.

16. (C) On Sudan

Yemane revealed that representatives of Sudan's Eastern Front would be in Asmara "next week" and wondered if embassy officials would like to meet with them. Yemane noted that there is peace in eastern Sudan, the EF leaders have taken up their allotted seats in Khartoum, and that some integration of forces has gotten off to a sputtering start, but he nevertheless seemed concerned about the pace and depth of the implementation of the peace accord. He said the "Eastern Front is a very weak coalition, politically" and commented that the badly needed development assistance (totaling USD 120 million annually) promised in the peace accord has only begun to trickle into the desperately poor region. When the ambassador said he had met the newly arrived SPLM representative who has opened an SPLM office in Asmara, Yemane reaffirmed Eritrea's long and friendly relationship with the SPLM. Regarding Darfur, Yemane said the recent talks in Sharm el-Sheikh had not led to any concrete agreement, but opined that another Arusha-like meeting sometime in the future might be helpful. He also noted that the fissiparous Darfur rebel groups had recently had some constructive discussions in Juba.

17. (C) Comment: That Yemane met the ambassador and DCM on Id al-Fitr (and thus with no Eritrean note taker or batman present) probably enabled him to absorb the ambassador's unvarnished comments on terrorism thoughtfully and without the need to be seen vigorously counter-punching to defend any

sense of affronted Eritrean honor or face. Informed observers in Asmara tell us Yemane Gebreab is unique among the regime's inner circle in that Isaias occasionally listens to his counsel and sometimes allows him to say "no," whereas all others are expected to respond with a reflexive "yes sir." End Comment.

MCMULLEN